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**The LEADING LADY**

by **GERALDINE BONNER**

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THE LEADING LADY \*\*\*

PROLOGUE—While dependent over the enforced hiding of her fiancé, Jim Dallas, slayer in self-defense of Homer Parkinson, member of an influential family, Sybil Saunders, popular actress, engaged to play "Twelfth Night" on Gull Island, on the Maine coast, in the company of her fiance's bosom friend, Anne Tracy; Anne's brother Joe, young waltzer; and Aleck Stokes, an actor infatuated with Sybil.

CHAPTER I—After the play, which carried off a big hit, the chief photographer, learns something of the jealousy, professional and otherwise, existing in the company.

CHAPTER II—Hugh Basset, director of the play, and Anne Tracy's fiance, tells Joe he has heard of Sybil's whereabouts in Jim Dallas and earn the reward offered by the Parkinson family. The boy's denial is not convincing.

CHAPTER III—Joe Tracy is arranging for a vacation trip. To Anne he betrays his enmity toward Sybil. Stokes tells Sybil he has news of Jim Dallas, and to secure the necessary privacy they arrange to meet in a small summer house near the main building.

CHAPTER IV—The sound of a pistol shot starts the assembled company. Investigation shows a revolver has been taken from a desk in the library. Flora Stokes' wife bursts in with the announcement that Sybil has been shot and her body carried off by the swift tide that races by the island.

CHAPTER V—Flora Stokes tells Basset she saw Sybil shot but did not see the murderer. Basset notices the murderer's picture in the newspaper and a man who looks like her. The company is accounted for with the exception of Joe Tracy, presumably on his trip. The discovery of evidence, and the authorities arrange so that no one can leave the island.

CHAPTER VI—Discussing the tragedy with Rawson and Basset, Williams voices the opinion that Flora Stokes is the guilty person, the deed being actuated by jealousy. While talking the sound of a crash in the living room makes them hasten there.

CHAPTER VII—Anne Tracy, shocked at her friend's awful death, is also shocked at the murder. Remembering his rage against Sybil, and realizing she is not sure he left her in the house, she pictures him as Sybil's murderer, and hiding in the house, the upper story of which is unoccupied. The story of which she is seeking to inform him of the close watch kept, she descends to the living room. There she dimly sees Joe and warns him not to try to escape. He disappears, and in her agitation she drops a lamp. She tells the three men she came downstairs for a book, and her explanation is accepted.

CHAPTER VIII

THE night search of the island had given up nothing and a daylight exploration was set for the morning. Before this, however, Rawson wanted to go through Miss Saunders' room, which by orders had been locked and untouched.

Stepped in the morning sun, warm and still, it extended its welcome as if waiting for her entrance. The signs of feminine occupation caught the eyes of the man and held them chilled on the threshold. A delicate perfume filled the air, the fragrance of her passing habitation still lingered in ghostly sweetness after the living presence had gone.

Rawson moved first, shaking off the spell. He looked into the open wardrobe trunk, completely packed but for the last hanger. "Going to put her costume there," he said, "touching it with his index finger. He pulled out the drawers and ran his eye over their contents. A gray crepe dress lay across the foot of the bed, beside it a cloak and a black hat with a water-lily garland hanging from it. "These," he said, "weren't the clothes left out to wear."

Basset nodded. He could see Sybil in the gray dress with her hair a golden fluff below the edge of the black hat. She had worn them on the way up and been pleased when he had admired her costume.

The dressing table was the only place in the room that her neat arranging hand had not touched. It was covered with a litter of toilet articles, cold cream jars, rouge boxes, powders and scents, a silver hand mirror, a pair of long white gloves. Williams picked up a beaded bag and opened it. It contained a wisp of a handkerchief, a bunch of keys, a lipstick, and a gold change purse. In the central compartment were three five-dollar bills and the thirty-five cents in coin. "This could have been all the money she had," he queried.

"Why not?" said Basset. "I guess some of us haven't that much. She didn't need any. All our expenses were paid and she was going straight home. One of these bills was probably intended for Miss Pinkney."

Nothing more came to light. The closets were empty, the bathroom contained a few toilet articles and a nightgown and negligee hanging on the door. Obviously a place swept clean for a coming departure by one who had no premonition that that departure would be final.

They passed out and along the hall, Rawson wanting to see the disposition of the passages and stairs. At the door next to Miss Saunders' he stopped, asking who occupied that room. It was vacant now, but it had been Joe Tracy's. He opened the door and looked in upon another chintz-hued chamber, all signs of recent habitation removed that morning by Miss Pinkney's energetic hand. A steamer

light smoothly yellow like a face of wax.

Williams' questions were many and pointed, and it soon became evident to Basset what he had in mind—that her explanation of her actions did not account for the length of time she had been on the shore. Whether she saw it or not he could not tell; checked in her story she would answer patiently, reiterating her first statement that her stunned condition had robbed her of the power of thought or motion. But he was sure Stokes had grasped the trend of the query; he drew nearer, his flexible lips working, the hand hanging at his side clenching and unclenching. Once he essayed to speak, a hoarse sound throttled in escape. It pierced the strained attention she was giving her questioners and, for the first time, she hesitated and fumbled for words.

When it was over and they returned to the house Stokes dropped to her side and drew her hand through his arm. She dropped against him; her arrow-body looked nerveless, as if but for his support it would have crumpled and sunk. But he planted his feet with a hard defiance, each step drew a ringing echo from the rocks and he held his head high. Basset, following them, noted his rigid carriage, and when he turned his profile, the wide nostril spread like that of a winded horse.

They began with the pine grove. Needles carpeted the ground, slippery smooth, a beaten trail winding between the tree trunks. Beyond it the path ascended the bare slope to the summer house, a small, six-sided building, covered by a thick growth of Virginia creepers that swathed its rustic shape. In one of its walls the vines, matted into a mantle of green, had been cut away to form windows. The other two sides held the entrances, one giving on the path that descended to the pine grove, one to its continuation to the Point. A circular seat ran round the walls, and a table in the same bark-covered wood was the only movable piece of furniture. This was drawn up against the seat at one side. Rawson moved it out as the other two ran exploring eyes over the walls, the floor-sills, and the floor of wooden planking upon which a few leaves were scattered.

"Here," he cried suddenly, "what's this?" and drew from a crevice where the logs crossed, some scraps of a coarse gold material.

He held them up against the light of the opening—three short strands of what might have been the gilt strings used to tie Christmas packages.

"What do you know about this?" he said, offering them to Basset's gaze.

Basset looked, and Williams with craned neck and lifted brows looked too. They were exactly of a length, broken filaments of thread attached to the end of each.

"They've been torn off something," Rawson indicated the threads, "caught in that joint of the table legs and pulled off. Did she have anything like this on her dress anywhere, a trimming or something?"

"Fringes," Basset interrupted, "the fringe on her sash."

"Ah!" Rawson could not hide his exultation. "Now we've got something we can get our teeth into."

"Yes," Basset took the pieces and studied them in the light.

"That's what it is. She wore a wide sash round her waist with ends that hung down edged with gold fringe. This is a bit of it."

"Well," said Williams, "that's a starter anyhow. She was in here."

Rawson sat on the bench and drew the table into its former position.

"It no' only proves she was in here, but it proves a good deal more. The sash is the way she was with the table as we found it close in front of her. The ends of her sash would have been in contact with the table legs. Now she jumped up quickly—do you get that? If she'd gone slow or had time to think she'd have felt the pull and unloosed the sash—but she sprang up, didn't notice." He looked from one to the other, his lean face alight.

"Frightened," said Basset.

"So frightened she didn't feel it, and moved with such force she tore the fringe off. That scare took her up from the seat and sent her flying through the doorway for the Point."

"Hold on now," said Williams. "If she was as scared as that, why didn't she go for the house, where there were people?"

"Because she was too scared to think. Some one with a pistol was on the other side of the table. He rose and went to the entrance facing the Point. And the person with the pistol shot at her from here—winged her as she ran." He turned to Basset. "That's why you saw no one when you looked out for your shot. She was in here. The murderer was in here flying low."

"Yes," Basset thought back over the moment when he had stood in the living room doorway. "That's the only place she could have been or I have seen him. But they wouldn't have been any time together—couldn't have had a quarrel or a scene. According to Mrs. Cornell it was only six or seven minutes after she saw Sybil go out that she heard the shot. That would give them only two or three minutes in here."

"Time enough to draw a gun and back it up with a few sentences. It bears out what I've thought from the start—not an accidental meeting, but a date, to which the woman came unsuspecting and the other person to kill."

"Then Mrs. Stokes got on to that day-date," said Williams, "and broke in Stokes'."

Basset Showed Them a Staircase at the End of the Hall.

some one, Mrs. Cornell he thought, had. It was the servants' quarters and had not been occupied during their stay. Miss Pinkney and her helper having had rooms on the gallery.

Later on they would take a look up there; the island was their business now. According to Williams, all this searching was merely a formality, and they descended the stairs, conferring together. It was their purpose to keep Sybil and his wife from any possibility of private communication. Shine had been delegated to stay beside one or the other of them, and so far they had made no attempt to get together. Their amenability added to Williams' suspicion and it was his suggestion that they should bring Stokes with them on their hunt. When that was finished they planned taking Mrs. Stokes to the place of the murder and making her rehearse just what she had done.

Starting from the Point they explored the island foot by foot, opening across the open expanse where a rabbit could hardly have hidden and prying into the hollows and rifts of the boulders on the shore. The path that followed the bluff's edge, making a detour round the ravines, yielded neither trace nor sign. The little amphitheatre, sunk in its green cup; lay open to their eyes as they stood on its brink. They walked among the stone seats, seamed with a velvet padding of moss, and gathered up a few programs, a pair of woman's gloves, and a necklace of blue beads.

That brought them to the end. The house had no outbuildings; garages, barns and sheds were in the village across the channel. There was no one in hiding on the island.

They found Flora, Shine and Mrs. Cornell in the balcony. As they came up Flora looked at them and then averted her glance as if in proud determination to show no curiosity. Rouge had been applied to her cheeks, and her dry lips were a vivid rose color. The high tints showed ghastly on her withered skin, but her dark eyes were sentient with an avid burning vitality. It was like a face still holding the colors and hot warmth of youth suddenly stricken by untimely age.

Williams, halting at the foot of the steps, told her what they wanted—her position and Miss Saunders' at the time of the shooting, going over the ground and making it clear to them. She rose alertly with a quick understanding nod—she would be glad to, it was her earnest desire to be of help to them in any way she could. Rawson noticed that she did not look at her husband but kept her eyes on Williams with an intent frowning concentration, moving her head in agreement with his instructions.

At the shore she was eager to explain everything, took her place on the path where she had been when she saw Sybil appear on the other side of the hollow. Her rendering of the scene was graphic and given with much careful detail. The men, grouped about, followed her indicating hand, stopping her now and then with a question. Stokes stood back watching his face in the searching day-

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on it. And there's only one person that date could have been with—Stokes."

Basset's nerves were raw with strain and anxiety. This reiteration of a rendezvous with Stokes maddened him.

"But it couldn't have been. I've told you. I knew Miss Saunders the man, and besides I have the evidence of my own eyes that she avoided him in every way she could. Make an appointment to meet him alone! She'd as soon make an appointment with Satan for a moment. Rawson was impressed; he had formed a high opinion of the director's candor and truthfulness and his words weighed with him.

"It is a good deal by what you say, Mr. Basset, and as to this meeting of which I'm convinced—whom it was with I don't know. Williams here has made up his mind and worked out his case. I don't agree with him. I believe Mrs. Stokes is telling the truth. What she says hangs together all right. That she may know something is possible, but I don't think she's guilty."

"Then you must think it's Mrs. Stokes," said Williams with some heat. "There's nobody else it could be."

Rawson considered before he spoke.

"I don't see Stokes as deliberately murdering the woman he was in love with. That's generally an act of impulse, sudden desperation. And there was no impulse here. Careful premeditation—the stealing of the revolver, luring her to the summer house, the threats or rage when she got here that made her fly. It's more like the workings of passion. Stokes doesn't look to me the kind of man that would kill so carefully. He's too soft."

"Then who was it?" Williams exclaimed. "Somebody killed her."

Rawson moved toward the doorway.

"That's about all I'm willing to agree to at present. But I'd like to see Stokes again. He and his wife may know more than they say—I don't deny that—but she's got a better nerve than he has. We'll get him into the library and have a whack at him."

(To Be Continued.)

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